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The Freedom of Art, The Art of Freedom: Sir Philip Sidney's *An Apologie for Poetrie* and George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie*

There are few stylistic categories which have received more critical interest than *mimesis* or *imitation*. My aim in this paper will be to analyze this category from the viewpoint of two prominent pieces of Elizabethan literary criticism from the second half of the sixteenth century. Ascribed to George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, dated 1589,[1] and Sir Philip Sidney's *An Apologie for Poetrie*, published in 1595[2], are more than treatises on aesthetic qualities of poetry. I will deal here with the notion of freedom of imitating and restrictions connected with the application of imitative patterns, in the *milieu* of the Elizabethan court. The focal point of my investigation will refer to the correlation between aesthetic and didactic aspects of poetry, understood in the context of moral refinement.

In his illuminating essay, Heinrich Plett (1983: 599) claims that the basic features of courtly culture of Renaissance England are "tropical, fictional, artificial – and thus aesthetic." Elizabethan court structure is compared to an atom with a very prominent nucleus – the Queen herself – surrounded by many spinning electrons (elements of courtly culture), whose shape was fashioned on the basis of imitated outer systems, e.g. antiquity and Italian patterns. The author reveals that the means of aesthetics, such as irony, allegory and impersonation, were the constituents of courtly culture. These categories influenced the behaviour of the courtiers, who had to perfect their life and stylize it as a work of art. Therefore, the author's viewpoint is that the aforementioned stylistic categories could be treated as socioaesthetic ones (Plett 1983: 612).

[1] During my investigation, I first addressed the original printed text (dated 1589) available from the Early English Books Online database (EEBO). For the purpose of this paper, I am using the modern edition of Puttenham's work by G. D. Wilcock and Alice Walker, published in 1936, which reprints the original text of *The Arte* from 1589.

[2] The *Apologie* was probably written about 1580 and was published 15 years later under two titles: *An Apologie for Poetrie* and *The Defence of Poesie*. Since I am using C. E. Vaughan's edition of Sidney's text, I will use the title and spelling applied in Vaughan's *English Literary Criticism*.

Following this interpretative line it is not unreasonable to claim that during the Renaissance period there were other aesthetic categories which can be understood in a broader, social context. In my opinion, *imitation* is one of them. Although their works differ in content and style, both Sidney and Puttenham touch upon the philosophy of writing and stress not only aesthetic, but also utilitarian aspects of poetry. In order to better understand this difference, I will focus on the way both authors treat the notion of the poet, of poetic invention, and of freedom in choosing content and form.

Although both works can be treated as texts written in favour of poetry, there are huge differences in their style. The difference is understandable, since we are dealing with two texts written for dissimilar purposes. Sidney, a courtier and a poet, is in fact writing a reply to Stephen Gosson's *The Schoole of Abuse* (1579). Therefore, although his work is treated as a piece of poetical criticism, it was originally designed as a skilful, erudite and rhetorical response to Gosson's claims. Thus, its oratory and classical structure was meant to confirm the superiority[3] of the author, whereas Puttenham's *The Arte* was designed as a manual, and, as we gather by the end of Book III, probably also a book of conduct in the style of Baldasare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*. Although Sidney also found inspiration in this work, it is mainly in Puttenham's text that we come across a set of instructions how to fashion a model poet and courtier through poetic means. Therefore, Sidney's *Apologie* should be compared to an observer's outlook, while Puttenham's manual could be treated almost as a prescriptive self-help book to follow.

In spite of this functional difference, both authors give similar arguments in praise of poetry, i.e. that all great thinkers, philosophers and historians were poets or good orators, and therefore these people who are trained in poetical art are more privileged or apt than those who are not poets. Moreover, they give the same etymology of the word *poet* which comes from Greek and means a "maker," and they draw a similar definition of poetry. According to Sidney (1896: 9),

> Poesie [. . .] is an Art of Imitation: for so Aristotle termeth it in the word mimesis, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth to speake Metaphorically. A speaking Picture, with this end to teach and delight.

[3] Sidney was the dedicatee of *The Schoole of Abuse* and hence we might treat him as a figure superior (not only in status) to Gosson. Sidney's position was privileged, since he could either support or discard Gosson's claims. We might imagine Gosson's surprise when he read Sidney's *Apologie*, as he did not expect an unfavourable reply to his text. *An Apologie* must also have crushed Gosson's hopes for Sidney's patronage.

As we can see, Sidney follows an Aristotelian definition of poetry and he also emphasizes the fact that the poet awakens the desire in people to be taught virtuous behaviours. In other words, the poet prepares the readers for being educated. According to Sidney (1896: 8), the world of Nature is a brazen one, "the poets only deliver a golden"

Puttenham (1936: 3) calls a poet a maker, but he also stresses the fact that a poet is a good imitator in the sense that he depicts things which are:

> Poet may in some sort be said a follower or imitator, because he can expresse the true and liuely of euery thing is set before him, and which he taketh in hand to describe: and so in that respect is both a maker and a counterfaitor: and Poesie an art not only of making, but also of imitation.

In these two initial statements we can see a similar idea of a poet and poetry, with different stress put on the notion of imitation. Puttenham talks about the creation of things and imitation of existing objects. Sidney adds a didactic value of poetry and creation of a *better* reality, a golden world, Nature improved.

This allegedly subtle difference in viewpoints on imitation is elaborated further in both works. Sidney's text seems to be more miscellaneous, since he connects the classical understanding of this matter as it was presented by Plato and Aristotle. Plato makes a distinction between good and bad imitation. The imitation of existing objects is a mere coping of the imperfect copies of the forms. But at the same time there is a type of good imitation which, through divine forces, reaches God and heavenly harmony. Sidney combines this view with the Aristotelian creative imitation which springs from the poet's imagination and gives him certain freedom of choice in the application of content and form. Therefore, we can say that Sidney distinguishes three kinds of imitation:

1. Imitation of God and heavenly harmony (e.g. found in King Salomon and King David)
2. Imitation of the real things (e.g. historical writings)
3. Imitation of things which may be (where creativity and imagination of "right poets" is employed)

The "right poets," according to Sidney, are those who follow their own invention, i.e. they represent the third type of imitation. As Ronald Levao observes (1979: 225), "the object of poetic imitation is one that is consciously framed to fit the poet's intellectual needs." In Sidney's opinion, poetry does not deal with truth. This is why poets must invent, and in the world of invention, there can be nothing false, especially if it serves good purposes. Therefore,

a good poet depicts things not by what they are, but by what they should be (Sidney 1896: 36):

> Poets persons and dooings, are but pictures, what should be, and not stories what have bin, they will never give the lie to things not Affirmatively, but Allegorically and figuratively written; and therefore as in historie looking for truth, they may go away full fraught with falshood: So in Poesie, looking but for fiction, they shall use the narration but as an imaginative groundplat of a profitable invention.

Sidney's view is summarised in Heinrich Plett's book *Rhetoric and Renaissance Culture*. Plett (2005: 121) notices that "a fictional, imagined reality is created through an artificial process (*ars*), the skilful employment of mental images, which is capable of influencing reality itself."

Puttenham's view, on the other hand, seems to be much more "classical." Levao (1979: 227) argues that *The Arte* "relies heavily on the Platonic theme of controlling our representations by carefully fitting the mind to objective truth." Puttenham insists that the orderly imagination must represent things "according to their very truth." His vision of poetry is much more restricted and he tries to convince the poets to have more control over their imagination. According to Puttenham, an unbounded vision of the author can provoke monstrous ideas in the reader's mind, and therefore, lead him to evil. In other words, opaque images may be misunderstood and later misapplied in real life. Perhaps an echo of this attitude can be found in Book II of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. Guyon, a virtous knight exposed to many temptations, needs a guide, Palmer, to control his actions so that his "foot does not slide" from the right path. And perhaps, following this Puritan cautiousness, this is also the reason why other allegories were interpreted – not to allow any wrong conclusions or bad examples.

In this moralising mode which distinguishes good and bad imitation, let us look at one of the most stunning passages in Sidney's *Apologie* referring to the way in which the imitation of the classics should be performed:

> Truly I could wish, if at I might be so bold to wish, in a thing beyond the reach of my capacity, the diligent Imitators of Tully & Demosthenes, most worthie to be imitated, did not so much keepe Nizolian paper bookes, of their figures and phrase, as by attentive translation, as it were, devoure them whole, and make them wholly theirs. For now they cast Sugar and spice uppon everie dish that is served to the table: like those Indians, not content to weare eare-rings at the fit and naturall place of the eares, but they will thrust Jewels through their nose and lippes, because they will be sure to be fine. (Sidney 1896: 53)

In this passage, Sidney addresses the imitators of the classics and asks them to use the ancient texts appropriately, i.e. not to misuse the copies so that they are inappropriate for the messages conveyed. Through this claim, Sidney underlines the fact that imitation, although it can be liberal, must be done prudently and creatively. This point can be treated as a response to an ongoing dispute included also in Roger Ascham's *The Schoolmaster* (1570) dealing with how the imitation of the classics should be performed. According to Ascham (1967: 56), when referring to classics, the scholar (or poet) should not only copy their eloquence, but should learn "all true understanding and right judg[e]ment."

Just as much as *how* to imitate, it is important *what* to imitate. J. W. H. Atkins (1947: 113, 116) mentions the fact that Sidney's *Apologie* is a very eclectic piece of literary criticism. Among its sources there are Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Cicero and patristic writings. Sidney's work itself is a good example of how Renaissance poets worked. The unlimited use of sources (classical works especially) shows that the poet was free to choose the best excerpts and ideas in order to convey his message. From the very beginning of his *Apologie*, Sidney (1896: 6–7) stresses the fact that the liberty of conceit is the divine force of poetry. Therefore, creative imitation does not only mean creating new forms and ideas using unbound imagination, but also using the existing sources in a sensible way.

The question of *what* and *how* should be included in poetry is another issue where Puttenham and Sidney differ. When considering the content and form, Sidney insists on the fictional nature of poetry and argues that its crucial feature is the poet's "feigning," "not rhyming and versing" (cf. Levao 1979: 228). Puttenham stresses the need to choose the right form to the contents that are to be conveyed. Whereas in Sidney's theory, *not* practice, poetry eludes the boundaries of form, Puttenham places great emphasis on the correspondence between matter and style. According to Sidney, versifying is not the key issue in the case of poems. It is the *invention*, the idea which makes poetry. Sidney recalls the example of a philosopher who, if he wants to teach, needs to give examples. Therefore, when the poet wants to teach the unknown, he needs to describe it in words. Poets have the right to create in whatever style and form they want because good things can come out only of good components: "for if severed they be good, the conjunction cannot be hurtful" (Sidney 1896: 26).

From these examples it follows that although Sidney's text might be considered "an apologie for libertie" in the choice of content and form, it also includes some contradictions. For example, Sidney (1896: 47–48) attacks playwrights for being too "liberal" in not following the Aristotelian unities. He demands a correspondence to be maintained between imitation and the actions imitated.

Therefore, what was acceptable in the case of poetry is not accepted in the case of drama. We will not encounter such a lack of consistency in Puttenham's text. When Puttenham (1936: 66) writes of poetical proportion, metrical patterns and *decorum*, he uses the classical examples and gives precise directions as to how these forms should be applied:

> For to an historicall poeme no certain number is limited, but as the matter fals out: also a *distick* or couple of verses is not to be accompted a staffe, but serues for a continuance as we see in Elegie, Epitaph, Epigramme or such meetres, of plaine concord not harmonically entertangled, as some other songs of more delicate musick be.

or:

> Poet must know to whose eare he maketh his rime, and accommodate himselfe thereto, and not giue such musicke to the rude and barbarous, as he would to the learned and delicate eare. (Puttenham 1936: 87)

Puttenham uses the classical writers' rhyming and metrical patterns in order to describe possible versification manners in English, and determines which of them would be actually appropriate. He also gives standards concerning classical distinction between barbarous and sophisticated audience. In other words, we talk of two types of imitation – the one of content, and the one of form. One influences another, but Sidney stresses the freedom of choice as far as the poetical form is concerned. Puttenham sees the form as conditioned by the content, being very scrupulous in his advice.

Despite the aforementioned differences between Sidney and Puttenham, there is one more shared quality which can be found in these two texts. We once again return to the utilitarian aspect of poetry as presented in both works, which is in tune with the Humanist – and especially Protestant Humanist – thought, and with what Plato stated in his *Republic* – poets must offer vital contribution to the state. Cicero's "teach, delight, and move" is transferred from the orator to the poet (cf. Levao 1979: 225). The poets' right is to create distilled moral concepts: "If the poet do his part aright, he will show you in Tantalus, Atreus, and such like, nothing that is not to be shunned; in Cyrus, Aeneas, Ulysses, each thing to be followed" (Sidney 1896: 19). Sidney (1896: 8) points out the didactic function of poetry many times. In the celebrated passage about Cyrus, he says that a skilful re-fashioning of the subject should teach people good behaviour:

> Which delivering foorth, also is not wholly imaginative, as we are wont to say by them that build Castles in the aire: but so farre substancially it worketh, not onely

> to make a Cyrus, which had bene but a particular excellency as nature might have done, but to bestow a Cyrus upon the world to make many Cyrusses, if they will learne aright, why and how that maker made him.

This passage highlights the aforementioned issue connected with this text, i.e. the fecundity of nature. Nature which is derived from the Latin *natus* (born) becomes a prolific force which can breed new forms. And these forms can be enhanced, or conceived, in the poet's mind sparked with divine inspiration.

It is not the only power of the poet. His mental abilities allow him to deliver cruel things in an enjoyable form:

> That imitation whereof Poetrie is, hath the most conveniencie to nature of al other: insomuch that as Aristotle saith, those things which in themselves are horrible, as cruel battailes, unnatural monsters, are made in poeticall imitation, delightfull.
>
> (Sidney 1896: 24)

Sidney uses once again Aristotle's argument stating that there is no direct correspondence between content and form. "Poetical imitation" is a smoothing construction laid over sometimes rough matter. In this way, reading good poetry should move one to desirable virtues. We need to see evil in order to appreciate the beauty of virtue and later to scorn improper behaviours.

As far as this utilitarian need to lead readers to virtue is concerned, the two authors agree. And they are not alone in their views. It is hard to talk about Renaissance poetry in terms of purely aesthetic values, although Elizabethan preoccupation with art was tremendous. However, it must be stressed once again that artistic form was an important dress of didactic guidelines. For instance, Puttenham recalls Edward III and the Order of the Garter to illustrate how courtly behaviour might be expressed in verse and, at the same time, how it can become an example to imitate. Below there is an excerpt from *The Arte* (Puttenham 1936: 103–104) which needs to be quoted at length:

> King *Edwarde* the thirde, her Maiesties most noble progenitour, first founder of the famous order of the Garter, gaue this posie with it. *Hony soit qui mal y pense*, commonly thus Englished, Ill be to him that thinketh ill, but in mine opinion better thus, Dishonored be he, who meanes vnhonorably. There can not be a more excellent deuise, nor that could containe larger intendment, nor greater subtiltie, nor (as a man may say) more vertue or Princely generositie. For first he did by it mildly & grauely reproue the peruers construction of such noble men in his court, as imputed the kings wearing about his neck the garter of the lady with whom he danced, to some amorous alliance betwext them, which was not true. He also iustly defended his owne integritie, saued the noble womans good renowme, which by licentious

> speeches might haue bene empaired, and liberally recompenced her iniurie with an honor, such as none could haue bin deuised greater nor more glorious or permanent vpon her and all the posteritie of her house. It inureth also as a worthy lesson and discipline for all Princely personages, whose actions, imaginations, countenances and speeches, should euermore correspond in all trueth and honorable simplicitie.

For Puttenham, a French motto is a perfect reflection of the lesson King Edward gave to his courtiers. The author describes the memorable event in which Elizabeth's renowned ancestor played the role of a moral leader who could pass the quintessence of his views in one line of a maxim. "*Hony soit qui mal y pense*" has become a spiritual dictum, a lexical representation of desired behaviour. In order to stress the need for giving poetical form to didactic lessons, Puttenham improves the standard English translation of this sentence, giving his own, more melodious one. David Javitch (1972: 881–82) compares the correlation between artistic examples as the one above and the types of behaviour at court in the case of Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* and in Book III of Puttenham's *The Arte*. His conclusion is that patterns for writing poetry must be in tune with the patterns of courtly behaviour. Following systematic models in poetry, i.e. imitation of e.g. ancient prosody, is an example of submissive behaviour which can be helpful in being an acquiescent courtier. It serves as a training, as part of *sprezzatura*. The court is an incubator for poetic minds, but through poetry the poets can become better courtiers.

Such association can be found, e.g. in Sir John Davis's poem *Orchestra, or a Poem of Dancing* (1596), which uses the Elizabethan Court as a pattern of behaviour delivered in a harmonious, poetic form which later could be treated as another pattern to follow. Therefore, we could start thinking of Renaissance imitation as a creative, ongoing process, focused on improvement of moral standards through artistic tools. From the last example we can observe that *creative imitation* moves from the territory of art into the manner of courtly behaviours. Poetry which imitates (or invents, in the case of Sidney) should be itself a desirable object for imitation. In this paper I have been trying to argue that despite many differences, both Sidney and Puttenham agree that *poetic imitation* in Elizabethan England can be understood as a socioaesthetic category linking poetry to the behaviours of the target readers or the writers themselves.

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